

# Creating Tools to Successfully Engage Communities and Families in Early Childhood Programs and Systems



RESEARCH TO ACTION  
PROJECT SUMMARY

## CREATING TOOLS TO ENGAGE COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

Research shows that family involvement is critical to the educational success of children. While much of the research done has focused on elementary aged children and families, there is also a body of studies linking improved outcomes for young children to parents' active involvement in their child's early learning experience. Some of the research has gone on to recommend ways to increase the level of family engagement, primarily in center-based early childhood education programs. This project addressed family involvement more broadly in the early childhood field as a whole, including family-based and informal care settings.

A second focus of the project was family involvement in early childhood systems - collaborative efforts to develop networks of strong, coordinated and responsive organizations that support families. Efforts differ across the country but most systems include county/city agencies, school districts, healthcare providers, home visiting and early intervention programs, as well as less formal settings like child care, playgroups and family resource centers. We sought to focus on strategies for organizations to develop pathways for families to expand their leadership to improve early childhood policies and systems.

The primary goal of the project was to develop practical tools for programs and systems to recognize, encourage and increase opportunities to empower families to advocate for equitable, family friendly early childhood services to ensure that all children and families have what they need to thrive.

## RESEARCH CONDUCTED

**Literature Review** — The primary consultant reviewed past efforts to define family and community engagement and connected with national leaders on these efforts to ensure there was no duplication of past efforts.

**Focus Groups** — Conducted four focus groups of parent leaders in Alameda County to identify barriers to family and community engagement and how to overcome them.

## ACTION TAKEN

**Development of a definition of the continuum of family and community engagement** — Building on the literature scan and focus group findings, the partners developed a clear definition of a continuum of parents' roles, from first teacher to policy advocate for systems change in early childhood, which can be used by EC-LINC partners and others.

**Development of a toolkit** — Using the continuum of family and community engagement, a step-by-step guide was developed to engage families and communities. The Ripples of Transformation toolkit is rooted in best practices and includes examples of how to use it in early childhood systems of care and in informal early childhood education settings. It is organized around three main sections representing opportunities for families to be engaged: 1) Engaging with their children; 2) Shaping programs and services; and 3) Influencing policies and systems. Each section highlights examples of the leadership journey, strategies representing innovations and best practices, resources to prepare programs to effectively engage families and stories from families and organizations in

### About EC-LINC

Early Childhood-LINC is a learning and innovation network for communities – a network of communities that have come together with CSSP to demonstrate effective approaches to developing local early childhood systems. Together, the participating communities tackle tough problems, test new solutions and accelerate progress toward ensuring that all young children and their families thrive.

### About the Research to Action Projects

With support from an anonymous donor, small groups of EC-LINC member communities worked together in 2016 on four “**Research to Action**” projects designed to advance the field of early childhood systems through actionable research.

EC-LINC member communities worked collaboratively to develop proposals that would allow them to address a topic of interest to both the EC-LINC network and a wider audience of early childhood systems builders. Grantees then undertook research that provides new insight into a question or potential strategy of interest, implement or test their findings within their local context and communicate and share lessons learned from the overall experience to both the EC-LINC network and other relevant stakeholders.

diverse communities. The toolkit was developed with input and feedback from the six communities through four group conference calls and individual interviews, as well as by state and national partners such as First 5 California, Head Start and the Annenberg Institute.

**Development of a policy brief** — Recommended actions were developed for program directors, agency directors, funders and policymakers to advance efforts to engage families along the continuum.

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## FINDINGS

This effort describes the ways in which program and agency leaders can form powerful partnerships with diverse families. It expands the concept and practice of family engagement from a separate strand of programming to a continuing stream of opportunities for families to shape systems – as decision-makers, advocates, partners and providers – leading to improved outcomes for both families and systems.

We identified several successful strategies for engaging families along a continuing stream of learning, partnership and leadership opportunities such as: developing values and principles that support families as assets, partners and decision-makers; developing trusting relationships with families and supporting their leadership through multiple levels of training; strengthening organizational capacity to support parents in new roles sharing power with families even if their actions challenge “business as usual”; and involving parent leaders as decision-makers on policies and budgets.

We learned that organizations do not necessarily have sufficient capacity to support families, a factor that hinders progress. Challenges include lack of training for staff to reflect on and navigate through issues of race, power and privilege in relationship to families; not enough time to support parents in their partner roles; inadequate, short-term funding dedicated to family engagement; unrealistic outcomes and timeframes; and difficulty shifting the organization’s mindset from “doing for” and “doing to” families to “doing with” families.

We also learned the importance of the undercurrent of racial inequality and bias in early childhood and how it impacts this work. This is particularly true as over the last few years, reports documenting the disproportionate suspensions of African American boys in preschool and evidence of racial bias in the classroom has brought to light structural inequalities in early childhood. The parent leaders and key informants who participated in this project felt this issue was one of the biggest barriers to engaging families as partners, leaders and advocates. We learned about successful efforts to engage families at a deep level despite institutional barriers and found examples of families developing their leadership skills, programs effectively meeting the needs of families in culturally responsive ways and systems pushing to improve service and remove barriers. Working in partnership with families to change the public policies, institutional practices, cultural representation and other norms that perpetuate racial inequity in early childhood systems can be a strategy to work toward reducing the impact of bias and structural racism that impacts the outcomes of children.

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## PRODUCTS

- A definition of the continuum of family engagement entitled Ripples of Transformation that enables providers, agency leaders, philanthropy leaders and policy makers to identify where parents they work with fall on the continuum and the possibilities of what they can aspire to in the future.
  - A toolkit entitled [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#) that is designed to inspire, challenge, and support leaders in early childhood – to embrace and move toward a vision of families as agents of change. It’s a practical guide with three sections that share examples, strategies, resources and stories that inspire. It also includes guidance for measuring the success of family engagement efforts.
  - A [policy brief](#) that outlines for agency, philanthropy and policy leaders the recommendations of this group to take family engagement strategies to the next level. The brief focuses on strategies that will deliver equity-driven engagement for systems change in early childhood.
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## IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

In this work we have defined family engagement not as a single strategy, but rather a continuing stream of engagement with opportunities for advancement of their leadership. We learned that pathways to leadership function best when they are flexible, allowing families to enter at any point along the continuum and move in and out of intense engagement roles as life circumstances change.

We believe building capacity and best practices in this area will require additional support. Policymakers and philanthropists can play a key role by providing resources and flexibility to think more deeply, test new approaches and create a shared learning environment driven by a genuine appreciation for the role families can and should play in shaping the programs and systems in their communities.

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## NEXT STEPS

A national [webinar](#) was conducted in January of 2017 to introduce the toolkit to the early childhood field. The partners are committed to testing the toolkit within their local early childhood systems to try new approaches and strengthen their own work in family engagement, and will be invited to participate in quarterly calls to share their findings and learn from one another. The lead partner, First 5 Alameda County has plans to develop a training on the toolkit to ensure provider staff can use this resource easily. CSSP, in collaboration with First 5 Alameda County, is convening a think tank for interested EC-LINC partners to better understand family engagement through a race equity lens. We will also be developing a parallel tool to the *Ripples of Transformation* to guide organizations in shifting structures, values and mindsets to facilitate a relationship of partnership and shared power with families.

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## PARTNERS

### Alameda County, CA

- Page Tomblin, Carla Keener and Lisa Erickson - First 5 Alameda County



### Palm Beach County, FL

- Marsha Guthery and LaNita Sanders - Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County



### Ventura County, CA

- Claudia Harrison and Heather Hanna - First 5 Ventura County



### Denver, CO

- Soren Gal - Denver's Early Childhood Council



### Boston, MA

- Gina Mittal - United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley



### Center for the Study of Social Policy

- Stephanie Doyle and Patsy Hampton



### Hartford, CT

- Von Jessee - The Office for Community Child Health, Connecticut Children's Medical Center



### Consultants

- Melia Franklin
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